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ABSTRACT

Observation and literature review show an increasing number of nontraditional students, many of them students "commuting" to college. Defining commuting students as older than 24 and living at some distance away from the college they attend, a survey was conducted among commuting students at a university. Preliminary interviews were conducted with commuting students to draft a list of questions for a data-gathering instrument. Following a pilot test, the survey instrument was finalized. A commuter population was identified and respondents volunteered to complete the instrument, which asked questions about what they do while commuting. Results of the study indicated that commuters were pragmatic and realistic about their expectations and activities. Those surveyed were mostly female and seeking masters degrees. Most commuted alone because it was more convenient, most drove more than 51 miles round trip, and some said they occasionally tried to recruit others for the ride. Activities the respondents did while commuting included providing encouragement, sharing problems, and brainstorming if they commuted with others. They also listened to radio and arranged other meetings. They rated as not helpful during commuting reading, using instructional materials, and using educational tapes. The study concluded that further investigation should be made of students' commuting time, with a view to increasing their use of educational technology, such as tapes, during that time. (KC)

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An Assessment of Adults' Learning Strategies While Commuting

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Commuting today has changed many of the ways that we conduct our lives in America. One of the ways is seen in the activities pertaining to our employment. Commuting can be a serious consideration when taking a new job or changing employers. Persons who decide to commute consider the advantages and disadvantages as seriously as an employers reputation, the working conditions, the hours of work, or a fringe benefits package. For the commuter, careful thought is important to things like, commuting time, the available transportation, and the problems that routine commuting creates. Along with this, the commuter usually weighs the difficulties related to inclement weather, road conditions, as well as traffic, vehicle care, and safety impediments.

Commuter have often developed creative ways of responding to the difficulties they encounter and tactics that help them to be more efficient. One recent innovation is described as the "telecommute.""Telecommuting" (Lewis, 1988) allows a person to commute and use telecommunications and electronics to help handle the workload. Among the many "aids" used by "telecommuters" are; computers, teleconferencing, recording equipment, audio tapes, cellular telephones, facsimile machines and an array of similar technologies.

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There are many reasons for commuting, most of them in some way relate to an individual's personal preference and choice. Some of the reasons are directly traced to lifestyle, family and personal matters, the avoidance of threat, the availability of services and support, or a desire to experience or effect change. To others, it is a decision to pursue the comforts and benefits of country or suburban areas, to acquire a particular kind of housing, or perhaps a need to acquire status and friends. The reasons are diverse and unique.

Some believe that this has fostered and is creating social problems and issues for urban, and suburban areas. Among the issue questions raised are concerns about the function and purposes of urban areas. Or questions like-who are the residents left in the cities and why ? Other questions have addressed taxing and finance, the growth and control of crime, poverty, and urban decay. The attention and the debate is ongoing.

The growth of commuting travel to one's work, to areas that provide services and to recreational opportunities has had an influence on education and the delivery of education. Educational opportunities are unfolding and are present in original and varied settings. This is having an impact on where and how Americans are pursuing a degree. The appearance of the comprehensive college or university campus is changing . The availability of educational programs may be seen in shopping centers, in industries, hospitals, in varying sizes of communities and neighborhoods, and even in the home. The view of

what a representative campus is for the commuting student is different. Today the commuter may find that the campus may or may not be in a single location. It may or may not have residential living facilities, and the students attending may or may not reflect traditional enrollment patterns in terms of age, sex or ethnic make up. Switzer (1988) describes the appearance of the campus this way:

> "The image of traditional ivy-covered college campuses with bell-towers dominant at their centers has given way to a contemporary image that includes campuses built in the centers of the nation's metropolitan and suburban areas. No longer do all university students walk idyllically from brick classroom buildings past fountains to quaint residence halls. University students now are equally likely to drive from their home to massive parking lots, attend two classes, and drive back home.(p.3)

This changing campus environment has extracted from institutional leaders fresh approaches and new ideas. Major changes and planning are taking place which has created institutions that have a "commuter orientation". Commuter oriented institutions are widely represented in many parts of the country. Some are found in small and large institutions as well. They are found in most parts of the country. As institutions react to this important segment of the student population, it is apparent that selected institutions are attempting to develop

strategies and plan by gathering data and information. As part of the attempt to understand and respond to the growing numbers of commuters, institutions have begun to scrutinize their enrollments proceed in a systematic fashion. This has meant that more attention has been given to the study of commuters' needs and problems. Pennsylvania State University (Copeland-Wood, 1985) and the University of Maryland (1989) have demonstrated a commitment by conducting an assessment and the study of commuters. Along with studies that have identified areas that need attention other indicators have pointed toward noticeably high levels of commuter student enrollments. In the Midwest the Illinois Community College Board (1983) at seven campuses questioned 2,847 students as part of a cross-sectional population of identified commuter students. At the University of Minnesota (Matross 1984) 81% of a surveyed group identified themselves as commuters, and at Cleveland State University Kagers (1981) indicated that the percentage rate for commuters there was reportedly in the high 90's. At San Diego State University, McCully (1980) has reported that all who attend SDSU have been commuters, and further observed that 6 out of the 19 (CSUC) State University campuses (without residence halls),are in effect commuter institutions.

As expected in new areas of study, there are many unanswered questions and areas opening for further inquiry and examination. In a review of the literature on commuting students questions

about the practical aspects of the learning process and commuters are not easily uncovered. This is a report of a study initiated in 1988 about practical matters. In order to address this area of commuter student study a survey was developed at an upper midwestern state institution of higher learning. In preparation for the survey it was necessary to identify some of the more widely applied terms. One is the "traditional student". Approaching this broadly Smith (1989) clarifies this suggesting that the term is used for students falling into the age range 18-24 years old. He suggests further that it applies to the student who, without interruption, attended college immediately after high school graduation. This is often considered "the norm" for most college and university student bodies. It is not as obvious or apparent when the term "commuter" is used. This expression has been used in different ways.. In some instances though it has also been applied restrictively. At times defining "commuter" has been left to the respondent-- a self-identification process. In other instances the guidelines have in a matter-of-fact way proposed that the commuter is simply one who travels some distance, (which may or may not be specified) to and from a campus. Yet in other situations the definition of commuter is comprised of narrower qualifiers such as; dependent student, part-time student, or one who attends evening classes. In order to include the dimensions of who, what, when and where of the term "commuter" the respondents of this survey were provided a definition with the descriptors included. In this study commuter was described as:.."an adult student that drives, or rides with

someone either to a class, or away from a class, to a location outside of the city limits of the place in which the class is held.

Related to other terms associated with the commuter it is important to point out there are a number of studies that make reference to a "commuter ecosystem" or what is considered the total affecting environment both on and off-the-campus. It is also considered important, as pointed out in some investigations, that the "pyschographics", or factors related to lifestyles, be part of the process that impacts on the commuter student. Because of the studies on student development, ecosystems and psychographics the residential/non-residential nature of a campus is gaining increased attention. This has relevance to all aspects of student life pertaining to residence halls, dormitories and student housing.

The extensive work completed by Chickering (1974) and Astin (1977) have added significantly to an understanding of the participatory activities and efforts of the commuting student. The studies that look into enrollment patterns and the concomitant concerns of commuters are an important focus working toward finding answers and solutions to problems associated with commuters. These include longitudinal investigations by the University of Maryland, (1989) the work of the University of South Carolina at Lancaster on retention (Rice, 1983) and the development of guidelines proposed by Jacoby and Thomas (1986). However, little has been done to determine what the act of commuting may do to affect the learner and the process of

learning. As mentioned, the telecommuter has demonstrated that the time spent traveling can be used productively. Is it also worth considering the use of time by a student during the commute to class? Can commuting time also be learning time? How do students use their time now ? What kinds of activities during commuting do students engage in that are helpful ? How can a student learn while commuting ? Is it possible to use this time in ways similar to the telecommuters' activities ? These and other questions were the basis for initiating the study described here-- an investigation of the learning strategies that commuters use while commuting.

Preliminary interviews were conducted with commuting students to draft a list of questions for a data gathering instrument. Questions were also organized that pertained to demographic factors as well as the time and cost of educational experiences, problems encountered and reasons for deciding to commute. From a list of some of the typical things commuters suggested that they do while commuting respondents were asked to indicate whether the items were helpful or not.. This included activities performed by themselves as well as with others. A pilot test was conducted and the instrument was finalized followed with a review by a qualified jury to validate the instrument. A commuter population was identified and respondents volunteered to complete the instrument. The summaries indicate percentages 51% or more on responses

Results of the study indicated that commuters seemingly were pragmatic and realistic about their expectations and activities.

As Figure 1 indicates those surveyed were mostly female and seeking masters degrees. Costs estimates for the next level of education were made from a list of 5 ranges. The lowest level on a range was $1,000 and the highest stated " over $7,000". The respondents were asked about the estimated time to complete the next level of education. The range of responses extended from 12 to 48 months. Grade point average estimates were provided by the respondents.

Figure 1: Summary of Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Findings
Sex	Female
Next Degree sought	Masters
Cost for next Level/education	$2001-5000
Estimated time-complete nest level	24 months
Grade point average	3.51-3.75

There were several factors among the responses commuters provided that helped to develop a tentative profile of the commuting students activities. When asked if they commuted with others or alone, most said yes, to commuting alone. Among those that said they didn't commute alone they indicated that driving the vehicle was part of their responsibility. When asked to rank the major problems with commuting, scheduling the "pick-ups" and "drop-offs" of riders, along with weather problems was the most

frequent response. The responses asked for distances driven and included a "5-25 mile" category, at the lower end, and an "over 71 miles" at the other. Most respondents drove a round trip of over 51 miles. Over 90% indicated they had attempted to recruit others but asked"seldom". In asking others they cited comfort, convenience, as the enticement to join in the commute. Of those who commuted with others, 2 persons generally shared the ride. The results in Figure 2, though interesting, suggested some areas to be explored.

Figure 2 : Profile Summary

Factor	Response
Respondent was vehicle driver	yes
Major problem encountered	scheduling
Average round trip	over 51 miles
Recruited others	seldom
Reason for commuting	convenience/comfort
Least number- shared commute	1
The greatest number-shared commuting	13
Avg. number sharing commute	2

In order to address the question of what happened during commuting time a list of possibilities was provided and respondents indicated whether they were helpful, definitely not helpful, or neither. These were presented as a listing of items a commuter might do during travel to and from campus. It

consisted of 22 items with provisions for additions by the respondents. Some of the items were directed to activities that depended on interaction with others during the commute, such as discussion, talk about examinations, brainstorming and supporting activities. Other activities were largely individual in nature. These were activities a person could do by themselves such as read or write. Others were combined activities such as listening to the radio, or arranging to meet at another time for study sessions. Selected activities are summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Summary - Selected Commuter Learning Activities

Activity	Response
Provide encouragement	yes
Share concerns/problems	yes
Read	not helpful
Brainstorm	yes
Discussion	yes
Test/discussion	yes
Write	not helpful
Use instructional materials	not helpful
Education games	not helpful
Listen to radio (N.P.R.)	yes
Educational audio tapes	not helpful
Arrange to meet-another time	yes

As one of the many exploratory attempts to examine the topic of commuters, it's apparent that opportunities for study are prompted by some of the findings. The responses indicating that many tend to commute alone is one area. The "seldom" response from those asked "if they recruit others to commute" stimulates a need for further information, and a deeper investigation as to why, and what the implications are for scheduling, services, and networking in an institution is needed. Information that the-round trip distance (over 51 miles)- and problems related to weather- are important areas for more specific information in a follow-up and further study.

Finally, responses falling into the larger categories of learning experiences suggest a more intense effort. It's possible that those areas considered "helpful" (e.g. encouragement etc.) should be reviewed as to what type of encouragement is conducted, what duration, and how is it accomplished. Additionally, what types of post-commute activities are conducted, and where, under what conditions and how satisfactory are the activities ? An area of importance is the application of the range of possibilities available in technology. Things that telecommuters are using. Can these developing technologies help the commuting student ? These and others are important topics for follow-up, adding to the growing body of information. Additional efforts will also contribute to improving the effectiveness of colleges and universities striving to serve their constituencies, communities and students.

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